



Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 108th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

WASHINGTON, WEDNESDAY JUNE 4, 2003

Senate

STATEMENT OF SENATOR DIANNE FEINSTEIN

*Honoring A Moment in History:
Fifty Years Since Man First Reached
the Roof of the World*

MRS. FEINSTEIN.
Mr. President, May 29, 2003 marks a true milestone, a triumph of the human spirit. On that day, fifty years earlier, two young men – Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay – became the first to reach the highest point on earth, the fabled summit of Mt. Everest.

29,028 feet above sea level, Everest had defied fifteen earlier attempts, including the doomed expedition of George Mallory, in 1924.

Some have called Everest the Third Pole, after the North Pole, first reached in 1909, and the South Pole, reached in 1911.

Small wonder, then, that these two intrepid climbers – the lanky bee-keeper from New Zealand and the sprightly Sherpa born in Tibet – became instant

celebrities back in 1953, and have since evolved into legendary figures.

The son of a yak herder, Tenzing Norgay, who died in 1986, became the first humbly born Asian to rise to global fame entirely through his own efforts and sheer willpower. In many ways his story has a strong American flavor to it – with enough determination and hard work, anyone can achieve anything.

Norgay spoke 13 languages but could neither read nor write. He always told his children: “I climbed Everest so you wouldn’t have to.” His son, Norbu, now a resident of San Francisco, took these words to heart. College became his Everest.

Equally extraordinary is how Hillary and Norgay used their fame not for personal gain, but as

champions of their people and, later, to help and protect the unique culture of the Sherpas.

For nearly 25 years now, I have been honored to consider Sir Edmund Hillary my friend. In September of 1981, he was with my husband when he fulfilled a dream: entering the beautiful Kanshung valley, in an attempt to climb the east face of Everest from Tibet.

In concert with the American Himalayan Foundation, Sir Edmund’s Himalayan Trust, which was established in 1962, has been leading the effort to build schools, bridges, hospitals, and Micro hydro plants, out of his deep and lasting affection for the Sherpa people.

To date, they have built 27 schools where once there were none. I am not

talking about just funding alone – Sir Edmund actually took part in the actual construction of these and other buildings. Here is a man who puts the divots back. Just ask the Sherpa children who grew up tending yaks who are now doctors, pilots and investment bankers.

The Himalayan Trust has also built two hospitals (one in Khunde and one in Paphlu) and 11 village clinics that provide health care for the Sherpa communities and trekkers alike.

The Trust has worked to combat the deforestation of the Khumbu (caused largely by tourism) by planting more than one million trees, to restore the sacred monasteries at Tengbouché and Thame – central sites for the spirituality of the Sherpas, and in the establishment, in 1976, of the Sagarmatha National Park (Sagarmatha is the Nepali name for Mount Everest.)

At 83 years old, New Zealand's former High Commissioner to India is still going strong. For half a century now he has been one of the enduring figures of our time.

He has taught me and so

many others about the simple yet majestic power of the Himalayas and the marvelous, but far too often forgotten people, whose ancient culture is tied so closely to those amazing mountains.

Being the first to reach the top of the world would ensure anyone's name in the history books – and Hillary and Norgay achieved that the moment news spread of their heroic accomplishment.

But I believe had they not been the men they were – soft-spoken and down-to-earth, devoted to actions and example, to helping others rather than themselves – then they would have ended up as mere footnotes.

Instead, the names of Hillary and Norgay remain an inspiration to people around the world. And I am absolutely certain that the same will be true 50 years from now, when it comes time to celebrate the 100th anniversary, and for many other anniversaries to follow.